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Ms Suzan Cox QC
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Dear Ms Cox

Thank you for your letter of 5 August 2011 about the Australian Government's consultation process following the release of the *Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory* discussion paper. Thank you also for your letter of 15 September 2011 providing a submission in response to the discussion paper. I apologise for the lengthy delay in replying.

The *Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory* consultations have been another important step in forging a real partnership between the Australian Government and Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory. Since this Government came to office, we have been committed to a reformed approach to engagement with Indigenous people, based on the principles of mutual respect, cooperation and mutual responsibility.

In 2008, we commissioned the independent review of the Northern Territory Emergency Response. The Review Board conducted consultations in the Northern Territory and recommended, among other things, that government actions affecting Aboriginal communities respect Australia's human rights obligations and conform with the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975*.

In 2009, we conducted extensive consultations on future directions for the Northern Territory Emergency Response, following which we reinstated the Racial Discrimination Act, changed income management to a non-discriminatory scheme, and redesigned other measures to be compliant with the Racial Discrimination Act. These consultations contributed in a very substantial way to resetting the relationship between the Government and Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory.

We have also had Government Business Managers and Indigenous Engagement Officers working on the ground in communities for the last four years. These have helped create a more effective mechanism for engagement between communities and government.

The *Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory* consultations are part of this ongoing dialogue between government and Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory. Whole-of-community meetings were held in 100 communities and town camps, together with public meetings in major towns. To ensure that everyone who wanted to had the opportunity to have their say, there were hundreds of less formal discussions across the Territory between Government Business Managers and Indigenous Engagement Officers and individuals, families and other groups in communities.

The Government worked closely with the Northern Territory Aboriginal Interpreter Service so that trained and well-prepared interpreters were on hand to assist most of the whole-of-community meetings. The Aboriginal Interpreter Service also assisted with short radio advertisements in 13 Aboriginal languages.

I believe that overall the *Stronger Futures* consultations were very successful. People engaged actively in the process, putting their views frankly and strongly, and welcomed the opportunity for a direct conversation with government. I participated personally, attending meetings in several communities and having separate discussions with individuals and groups including leaders, elders and other stakeholders. In their conversations with me, Aboriginal people were very clear about the huge level of need they face and about the expectations they have of government and of themselves. Their aspirations include things that any Australian would understand — that their children grow up safely, get a decent education and have a future that includes a job and a roof over their heads.

In relation to the observations you made about the consultation process in your first letter, I understand that similar comments were provided in a consultation meeting in Darwin on 28 July 2011 between representatives of a number of legal services and officers of my Department. I accept that there will be some elements of the consultation process that may not have met the expectations of all observers, and I am sure there are lessons that can be learned for the future.

Nevertheless, I am confident that the consultation process was thorough and fair. I made this point to representatives of the Aboriginal Peak Organisations (Northern Territory) who met with me in Canberra on 18 August 2011. The process was monitored by independent quality assurance consultants. In addition, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner and the Northern Territory Anti-Discrimination Commissioner were invited to observe the consultations.

I released the report of the consultations on 18 October 2011, along with the report of the independent quality assurance consultants. Both reports are available on the website www.indigenous.gov.au.

The Government's *Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory* policy response will involve both new legislation and funding.

On 23 November 2011, I introduced legislation that will repeal the *Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act 2007* and establish a new framework for moving forward in a spirit of genuine partnership with Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory.

The legislation responds to the issues that people identified as the most urgent through the *Stronger Futures* consultations, in particular ensuring that children attend school so they can get a good education and tackling the serious harm that is being caused by alcohol abuse. We will be improving and extending the existing Improving School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure to promote greater responsibility among parents for ensuring their children go to school.

We will also be continuing current alcohol restrictions in communities, increasing penalties for grog running and working with the Northern Territory Government to address concerns about alcohol licensing arrangements that are causing harm to Aboriginal people.

The legislation also continues a number of measures that have been effective in helping to make communities safer, in particular for women and children. We will continue the current pornography restrictions and the powers that enable the Australian Crime Commission to investigate violence and child abuse against an Indigenous person. We will also continue and improve the arrangements for community store licensing, which have helped to improve the quality and availability of fresh, healthy food in communities.

Importantly, we intend to continue to work with Aboriginal people and key stakeholders as we develop the *Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory* policy response. The Government has asked the Senate Community Affairs Committee to review the *Stronger Futures* legislation before it passes through the Parliament. This provides a further opportunity for interested stakeholders to contribute their views on the specific initiatives proposed in the legislation and ensures that these proposals are afforded proper scrutiny, debate and input from those who will be affected by them. I am hoping that the legislation will be debated and agreed by the Parliament in the first half of 2012.

Decisions will also need to be made about future investment strategies to ensure the provision of critical programs and services to continue to address the unacceptable level of disadvantage that is still being experienced by Aboriginal people particularly in remote areas of the Territory. We will be making decisions about future funding in the context of the next Budget.

The Government's *Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory* legislation and funding package is a direct policy response to the views expressed in the consultations. It also takes into account other available evidence, including the independent evaluation of the Northern Territory Emergency Response, the report of which was released publicly on 10 November 2011.

Building stronger futures for Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory will take time, effort and continued commitment and we are working closely with the Northern Territory Government but we know government cannot do this alone.

I look forward to your ongoing support in this challenging area.

Thank you again for writing.

Yours sincerely

JENNY MACKLIN MP